

Post 9/11 Geopolitics of the Middle East and Pakistan-Iran Bilateral Relations

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Abstract

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran have always been determined by the interplay of regional dynamics, geopolitics and role of external powers. This paper analyses the current politico-security trends, conflict sites, regional and global geopolitical designs and simultaneous interests of both countries. Apart from their different areas of interest and separate alliance systems, key factors such as interest of regional governments fuelling conflicts and supporting opposition agendas, sectarianism and ideological rivalries have affected their bilateral relations. The future of this relationship lies in strengthening economic cooperation and working together to stop the ingress of the Islamic State.

Keywords: Middle East, Arab World, Pakistan-Iran, Conflict Transformation, Geopolitics, Islamic State.

Introduction

In recent years, Iran, given its more pronounced foreign policy objectives, has emerged as a regional power:

For instance, the idea that Iran had a global responsibility toward Muslims, and that faith would bring victory, was based

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on Islam as its main resource. This helped push a strategy of ‘exporting revolution’ after 1979, despite some strategic constraints when implemented at states’ relations.¹

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has come out of its submissive posture and policies and adopted those that can make an impression and counter the geopolitical designs of other regional states and extra-regional powers. Unlike previous governments, President Hassan Rouhani has adopted a moderate approach. Since 2005, the world knew of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as a person who spoke the language of provocation and wanted to keep his country isolated. However, the entire dynamic changed after Hassan Rouhani’s election as the new President on August 03, 2013. For instance, he changed Iran’s policy outlook towards Iraq and strengthened ties by engaging with it politically and diplomatically.² The country’s policy approach towards the West also saw a shift particularly within the framework of its nuclear deal called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Tehran has now blended its ideological policies with more pragmatic and strategic goals such as its desire to collaborate with global powers in resolving regional conflicts, and establish itself as a state capable of protecting its own security and sovereignty. It was able to get the attention of global powers specifically after the nuclear deal was signed under the Obama administration in 2015.³ However, with President Trump having withdrawn the US from the JCPOA, new scenarios have emerged. While Iran has support from Europe, Russia and China over the deal, it is possible that it might now resort to more aggressive policies in the region.

¹ Kayhan Barzegar and Abdolrasool Divsallar, “Political Rationality in Iranian Foreign Policy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2017): 39-53, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2017.1302738>.

² Stephen Kinzer, “New President Hassan Rouhani Makes the Unimaginable Imaginable for Iran,” *Guardian*, August 3, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/03/iran-president-hassan-rouhani-us-relations>.

³ Sara Bazoobandi, “Iran’s Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges and Ambitions,” ISPI Analysis no. 275 (Milan: Istituto per gli studi di politica internazionale [Italian Institute for International Political Studies], 2014), 1-7, http://www.ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/analysis_275__2014_0.pdf.

Geopolitics is the ‘interaction of geography, power and foreign policy and it focuses on the states, people, borders, resources, environment, trade routes and human traffic.’⁴ With these elements of importance, geopolitics of the Middle East revolves around ideological and religious faultlines. The Arab states in the Middle East believe in strengthening extensive alliances with each other in order to support the elaborated cause of unity. Iran, being a Shiite majority state, shares very little with them and diverges in this regard. It seeks major support from Non-State Actors (NSAs) like Hamas and Hezbollah in the region, which remains a bothersome and disturbing element for the Arab states. While the smaller Gulf States such as Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates (UAE) remain acquiesce with Saudi Arabia, Iran continues to build its political influence elsewhere.

Meanwhile, if Iran is considered a major source of military threats and confrontation in the region,⁵ the strategic interests being pursued by other states of the Arab world specifically Saudi Arabia, usually remain un-discussed. The humanitarian dimension of the crisis in Yemen and Qatar are cases in point. Besides weak state machinery, increased dependence on international economic assistance and ideological rivalries, the continuous influence of foreign powers has also induced chaos and disorder in the region. Hence, while the conflict situation in the Middle East is often seen as a consequence of meddling by foreign powers in regional affairs, part of it is also due to power politics between states or global resource hunger, simultaneously.

Given the dynastic politics, foreign policy objectives, the Gulf countries being long-term allies, and Iran being a next door neighbour and geographically contiguous, presents a very unique situation for Pakistan. The historic, lingual, literary, cultural, trade and religious linkages with Iran also demand extraordinary diplomatic manoeuvring by Islamabad to

⁴ Hooshang Amirahmadi, “Dark Geopolitics of the Middle East: How the Region’s Autocrats and Foreign Intruders Created Growing Disorder,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs* 18 (2015): 86-94, <https://cdn.thecairoreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/CR18-Amirahmadi.pdf>.

⁵ Anthony H. Cordesman, “Tracking the Trends and Numbers: Islam, Terrorism, Stability, and Conflict in the Middle East” (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-trends-and-numbers-islam-terrorism-stability-and-conflict-middle-east/?block2>.

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maintain friendly ties with Tehran, as well as countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, especially when their respective interests are in a continuous collision with each other.

With increased hostility on its eastern border with India and western border with Afghanistan respectively, geographical contiguity of Iran and heightened internal rifts in the Arab world requires that Pakistan should tread carefully in its diplomatic policy formulation, as well as diversify its options in the neighbourhood. This paper will analyse Iran's foreign policy, contemporary security dynamics and factors behind persistence of conflict in the region. It will also evaluate the interests of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the overall situation, inferring a resultant equation and how it impacts the Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations.

Theoretical Framework

The evolution of realpolitik in and overall geopolitics of the Middle East can be understood under the Constructivist International Relations Theory or Constructivism:

In contrast to rationalist approaches such as neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivism denies that state interests and security (including notions of threat) can be objectively determined by an assessment of material resources and relative power capabilities. Constructivists argue that identities and intersubjective understandings help define when, for example, a powerful neighbor with nuclear weapons is viewed as a threat or not.⁶

The approach also demonstrates how a geopolitical change ensues as part of the process of shifting relationships and identities between states. For instance:

⁶ Waleed Hazbun, "The Middle East through the Lens of Critical Geopolitics: Globalization, Terrorism, and the Iraq War," in *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, eds. Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 211.

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By a similar logic, the political importance of geopolitical imaginaries is that they shape discourses and mobilize ideological power, rhetorical force, or political affect to promote certain notions of threat, geopolitical goals, and forms of authority over territory. In doing so, they often shape the policies and behaviors of states.⁷

Instead of taking the state for granted and assuming that it [school of Constructivism] simply seeks to survive, regards the interests and identities of states as a highly malleable product of specific historical processes.⁸

Constructivists pay close attention to prevailing discourse(s) in society as they not only reflect but shape interests and beliefs and help establish accepted norms of behaviour:

The end of the Cold War played an important role in legitimating constructivist theories because realism and liberalism both failed to anticipate this event and had some trouble explaining it... Moreover, given that we live in an era where old norms are being challenged, once clear boundaries are dissolving, and issues of identity are becoming more salient, it is hardly surprising that scholars have been drawn to approaches that place these issues front and center. From a constructivist perspective, in fact, the central issue in the post-Cold War world is how different groups conceive their identities and interests. Although power is not irrelevant, constructivism emphasizes how ideas and identities are created, how they evolve, and how they shape the way states understand and respond to their situation. Therefore, it matters whether Europeans define themselves primarily in national or continental terms; whether Germany and Japan redefine their pasts in ways that encourage their adopting more active

⁷ Ibid., 211.

⁸ Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," in "Frontiers of Knowledge," special issue, *Foreign Policy* 110 (1998): 29-46 (40), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1149275>.

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international roles; and whether the United States embraces or rejects its identity as global policeman.⁹

Considering case of the Middle East from the perspective of Constructivism, long prevailing circumstances of political and structural nature continue to influence the realities of today in the region. The persistent foreign influence of global powers specifically the United States (US), presence of sectarian faultlines along with the domestic regimes and foreign policy manoeuvring of regional states remain key dynamics of the Middle East. Similarly, the current trends of Middle Eastern geo- and bloc politics are constructed by historical instances such as the Islamic Revolution, Gulf war/s followed by the Arab Spring and proxy warfare in the region.

It is only after the Islamic Revolution that Iran which was submissive to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) transformed its posture (as it now presses heavily for protection of sovereignty, national interests and export of revolution). Similarly, the Gulf war/s further widened the sectarian faultlines in the region. Saudi Arabia and Iran have opposing political discourses: while Riyadh tends to use realpolitik in its external affairs, Tehran often bases its decisions on ideological considerations. As a consequence of social and structural flaws of long ruling reigns and public resentment towards it, massive public protests and wave of violence led to regime change in various regional states. At the moment, the Middle East is home to the largest number of conflict sites including Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Bahrain. Qatar has been the recent addition to this list.

In all these conflict sites, it is the writ of the government being challenged by rebel or opposition forces; and various state or non-state actors (NSAs) are either being backed by the foreign powers i.e., the US, Russia or Turkey or regional states like Saudi Arabia, Gulf countries or Iran. The Gulf countries blame Iran for supporting the Shiite governments and oppositions in respective countries of turmoil. Meanwhile, Iran together with a pro-Iran government in Iraq and support of Lebanon has its military men and advisor on ground in Syria in support of Bashar al-

⁹ Ibid., 41.

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Assad's government. Regional countries also suspect Iranian support behind the Houthis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia sees these developments as its encirclement and formation of a Shiite crescent. However, the support of extra-regional has also been oscillating. For instance, with the signing of Iranian nuclear deal, it was opined that the US might give Iran a larger role in the region given Iran's efforts for political sustainability in Iraq during former President Obama's administration. However, with Trump's election as the US President, the weight has been placed behind Saudi Arabia. Instances like President Trump's visit to the Kingdom, his presence at the Arab Summit, signing of bilateral multibillion dollar defence deal and last but not the least, Kingdom's support of Trump's decision regarding the nuclear deal are all significant developments in this regard.

Contemporary Regional Security Dynamics and the Middle East

The Middle East's political geography has entered its third wave since the end of the Cold War:

The first wave began with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The second wave followed World War II, when the European colonial order crumbled. And the third wave will reach its apex with the demise of the American order in the region and the spread of political disarray... The contemporary Middle East is the product of these three geopolitical waves.¹⁰

In this transitional phase to the third wave, the intersecting factors which define geopolitics include power, geography, foreign policy, along with the population, borders, resources, trade routes, and human traffic. Due to this reconfiguration, these factors have assumed floating realities, varying significance and differing directions - failed states, conflicted geographies, nationalist movements, crippled economies, traumatised and humiliated people, growing inequalities, increased poverty, plundered

¹⁰ Amirahmadi, "Dark Geopolitics of the Middle East: How the Region's Autocrats and Foreign Intruders Created Growing Disorder," 86.

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resources, devastated environment, violent radicalism, foreign intrusions and persistent strategic and ideological rivalries.¹¹ These characteristics stand out as major contours of contemporary regional security dynamics.

Apart from countries facing political upheavals, the region is passing through an inescapable security quagmire, a situation caused by the chaos, instability and disruption in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.¹² In Syria, despite strong opposition of the US, President al-Assad is still in power. Historically, Iran has remained a close ally of Syria and staunch supporter of Assad. As the US, along with other allies continues its airstrikes, Iran and Russia have been fighting opposition groups. The US and Russia are on opposite grounds which further worsens the situation in Syria. The withdrawal of the US and allied forces from Iraq left behind a power vacuum and complete societal meltdown. Iran being Iraq's neighbour has not only filled the political void, but has also stirred up trouble for the US via proxy play to support the Shiite interests in surrounding multiethnic states. While Yemen remains a case of regime change gone wrong, Iran is believed to be supporting the rebels. The new regime is intact but governance issues prevail.

This contemporary situation in the Middle East has a background. The region has been host to great civilisations throughout history, its politics and administrative affairs shaped by various: i) structural factors, ii) political actors and, iii) contextual factors (constituting of regional and global dynamics). According to Sinkaya:

Politics is an outcome of exchanges between the actors in addition to their interactions with the structural and the contextual factors.¹³

It is the geopolitical position/characteristics, physical geography, self-sufficient capabilities, economy alongside social structures,

¹¹ Ibid., 86.

¹² Nazir Hussain and Mansoor Ahmed, "Rising Iran: Implications for the Middle East and Pakistan," *Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2016): 24-42, http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/2-Nazir_Hussain_and_Mansoor_Ahmad_SS_Vol_36_No.2_2016..pdf.

¹³ Andrea Dessi, *Regional (Dis)order in the Middle East: Historical Legacies and Current Shifts*, report 17-09 (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2017), <http://www.osce.org/networks/newmedtrackII/347366?download=true>.

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demographic features, ethnic/ religious compositions of societies and historical legacies which account for the ‘structural factors’. Furthermore, ‘state’ stands to be the principle actor in Middle Eastern politics. Other than the ideological and structural issues among the regional states, great powers like the US have greatly impacted the region, especially after it invaded Iraq in 2003. The US has spent the major chunk of its resources in the Middle East in Iraq and Syria in order to hunt down extremist forces, those which could pose a threat to its security. First, it was the al-Qaeda; now it is the Islamic State (IS). After 9/11, the US invaded countries like Afghanistan and Iraq under its strategy of regime change and called for restoration of democracy in states which had prolonged dictatorial rule. As US presence with limited number of troops marks its fifteenth year in Iraq, its fight with extremist groups does not seem to be over:

As has too often been the case in Iraq, progress in the military sphere is not being matched by equivalent (or even commensurate) political progress.¹⁴

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in recent times has taken laudable steps like decentralisation of power to the provinces followed by his desire to install a more technocratic yet less political government set up, but Abadi’s government continues to have little to show for all its good intentions, and that is costing him support in a variety of quarters.¹⁵ In the case of Syria, the US along other allies, is targeting the hideouts of the IS and other *jihadi* groups. As reported:

The US has accused President Assad of responsibility for widespread atrocities and says he must go. But it agrees on the need for a negotiated settlement to end the war and the formation of a transitional administration. Besides, the US supports Syria’s main opposition alliance, the National

¹⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Iraq Situation Report, Part II: Political and Economic Developments* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/29/iraq-situation-report-part-ii-political-and-economic-developments/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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Coalition, and provides limited military assistance to 'moderate' rebels.¹⁶

In case of Yemen, the simultaneous campaigns led by Saudi Arabia, Iran and the US have stirred up a lot of confusion regarding the crisis situation. Yemen, being a key ally of the US against al-Qaeda is of critical importance to the US. However, the US currently has been trying to get Saudi Arabia and the UAE to fix the crisis in Yemen by instilling fear that Iran might increase its influence there. This strategy, if analysed could further hurt interests of the US with lesser chances to serve the real purpose.¹⁷ With the humanitarian fringe of the crisis growing intense, there are rare prospects of resolution in the near future.

However, the contextual factors emerge as a consequence of interaction between the geographical position, sociopolitical situation in the region, the historical legacies and political, economic external and cultural factors.¹⁸ For instance, given the events and happenings in the Middle East today, having oil and other energy resources as strategic assets, impacts its domestic and foreign policy. The power of certain social classes, military elite and clergy also shapes politics, alongwith the minorities' relations with the government.

The current security complex in the Middle East can be analysed in three ways i.e., i) domestic, ii) regional and iii) international. At the domestic level, major issues faced by states other than sectarian civil wars include economic stagnation, sub-national conflicts, political chaos, weak central governments, corruption, devastated society, ethno-religious quagmire, terrorism and religious extremism war which have induced infrastructural and human loss and refugee crisis. At regional level, the power tussle, ideological rivalries alongside bloc politics, the far-reaching impact of the Arab Spring (which started off from one state i.e., Tunisia and then pushed various other states such as Egypt and Libya into endless

¹⁶ "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand," *BBC News*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587>.

¹⁷ Andrew Exum, "What's Really at Stake for America in Yemen's Conflict," *Atlantic*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/yemen-trump-aqap/522957/>.

¹⁸ Dessi, *Regional (Dis)order in the Middle East: Historical Legacies and Current Shifts*.

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chaos and ranks of failed states), and the subsequent involvement of regional powers are leading factors in regional instability. At international level, it is the formation of the alliance system to tackle the issues of the Middle East primarily terrorism and extremism, concerns related to the emergence of Daesh, chaotic Syrian conflict, Iranian nuclear programme and thrust for rich hydrocarbon resources which has dragged Cold War rivals directly to interfere in the domestic and regional affairs of the Middle East.¹⁹

Suffice to say that the primary reasons behind such circumstances, almost all of the violence is contained within the region, which primarily consists of friction between the governments and the people, foreign intrusion and the threat of terrorism and extremism.²⁰ If the war has wrecked Syria and Iraq, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and Qatar calls for deep introspection of circumstances and policy deliberations of various regional and extra-regional actors who have stakes in the conflict. Given below is the brief account and analysis of situation of the states in turmoil and role of regional and extra-regional players in perspective.

Syrian Conflict

The armed conflict in Syria has escalated in recent years. Both the state regime and rebels see this fight as an opportunity of survival, leaving behind no prospects of resolution or negotiations. Besides the issues of domestic politics, extra-regional powers have continued their policies of use of force and intervention. Considering its far-reaching impacts, external supporters treat this situation as a zero-sum game. Until now, regional and extra-regional stakeholders have clearly appeared determined to avoid any solution or outcome that could be disadvantageous for them. Through diplomatic and financial means and military aid in some cases, these external forces had been able to escalate the conflict, and at the same time, strengthen the hands of hardliners. It is suspected that there exists no

¹⁹ Hussain and Ahmed, "Rising Iran: Implications for the Middle East and Pakistan," 27.

²⁰ Cordesman, "Tracking the Trends and Numbers: Islam, Terrorism, Stability, and Conflict in the Middle East."

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good reason to expect that the situation in Syria will either be won militarily or resolved politically in the foreseeable future.²¹

The conflict has now more semblance with the proxy play of various regional and extra-regional powers. Amidst this critical situation, two blocs i.e., the US and Iran have emerged with various regional and extra-regional characters supporting each side. An occasional paper by RUSI provides the timeline of this support:

In the early stages of the conflict, Iran limited its involvement to providing technical and financial support to the Syrian regime, mainly delivered via the Quds Force. In late 2012, the force played a crucial role in creating the National Defence Forces (NDF), a Syrian paramilitary organization assisting the regular army and mustering some 100,000 fighters from various religious sects. Its funding is allegedly supervised by Iran. Between 2011 and early 2013, as conditions on the ground deteriorated, Iran sent members of its Law Enforcement Force and IRGC Ground Forces to advise Assad and to provide training and logistical support to the Syrian army. By late 2013, Russia had gradually taken over this role, while Iran had increased its presence on the ground. Until April 2016, the total number of IRGC and Iranian paramilitary personnel operating in Syria was estimated at between 6,500 and 9,200... Iran is believed to have supplied Syrian government forces and Shia militias with light arms and advanced strategic weapons, including rockets, rocket launchers, Kalashnikov rifles, antitank missiles and ammunition.²²

²¹ Muriel Asseburg and Heiko Wimmen, "Civil War in Syria: External Actors and Interests as Drivers of Conflict," SWP Comments 43 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [German Institute for International and Security Affairs], 2012): 1-7, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2012C43_ass_wmm.pdf.

²² Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi and Raffaello Pantucci, eds., "Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict" (paper, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, London, 2016), 4-5, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf.

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Contrary to predictions, the Syrian regime has been able to withstand global pressures and onslaught for the last five years.²³ At the regional level, there exists an assumption that the Syrian crisis is an outcome of proxy warfare where Saudi Arabia and Iran are fighting a ‘battle of influence’. It is believed:

The Syrian-Iranian alliance which dates back to the years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in this particular case cannot be ignored, which shares various common perceptions with Iraq, defence against US intervention and convergence of interests on various regional issues. If Tehran stood behind the Assad government, Riyadh stood squarely behind the Syrian opposition. It is believed that Riyadh’s main focus has not been the political transition, but its bid to weaken Iran with the fall of the Assad government. Among other developments, the Washington’s retreat from its stance of militarily attacking Syria has not only frustrated Riyadh’s strategic objective of isolating Iran in the region, but it has enhanced Tehran’s influence in the region. In the wake of nuclear deal signed in 2015 and growing Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria, it was once hinted that the US policy with respect to Syria might see a significant change whereby a larger role would be given to Iran.²⁴

However, in lieu of recent developments, it is believed that US’ withdrawal from the JCPOA and reinstatement of sanctions would force Iran to roll back its influence in the region as a consequence of economic pressures and growing discontentment among ordinary Iranians against the government.²⁵

²³ V. P. Haran, *Roots of the Syrian Crisis*, report no. 181 (New Delhi: Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, 2016), https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/RootsoftheSyrianCrisis_VPHaran.pdf.

²⁴ Farideh Farhi, Sarah Birke, Matthew Levitt, Hussein Ibish and Chuck Freilich, “The Middle East after the Iran Nuclear Deal,” interview by Zachary Laub (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015), <https://www.cfr.org/expert-roundup/middle-east-after-iran-nuclear-deal>.

²⁵ Ilan Berman, “The Iran Deal Is Dead. Now What?” *National Interest*, April 23, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-iran-deal-dead-now-what-25524?page=0%2C1>.

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Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, Iran has been the only regional country, both capable and willing to send military troops there. Through such an approach, Iran is trying to maintain the balance of power, a key feature and concern of its foreign policy.²⁶

While regional players have been active in Syria since the early months of the conflict in 2011, the intensity of their involvement has clearly escalated in recent months. In June, Hezbollah fighters played a key role in helping President Bashar al-Assad seize the strategic town of Qusair. And together with Iranian advisors, they have now assumed a greater role in facilitating regime efforts. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey remain the key sponsors of the rebel movement, providing it with arms and finance. There is also a growing cohort of foreign militants – from across the region and beyond (including from the Central Asian – Caucasus region, the Af-Pak theatre, and Europe) – fighting on behalf of the rebels.²⁷

The Syrian crisis did not have a sectarian imprint in the early days, but now it is increasingly having one. Focusing on its spillover effects, given the presence of Islamists and radical movements, it is likely that sectarianism would exacerbate in the region. Given the background of pitting the Sunni against the Shiite faction, there will be a continual, longstanding power struggle in this territory.

Situation in Iraq

Many analysts view the current situation of the Middle East and the Arab world as the consequence of the US invasion on Iraq in 2003. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni leader of Iraq, and the Shiite community was in minority at the time of invasion. Iraq, under his leadership, fought wars with Iran and Kuwait. However, with the collapse of Saddam's regime in 2003, Iraq's foreign policy underwent massive changes. Iran always

²⁶ Bazoobandi, "Iran's Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges and Ambitions."

²⁷ Julien Barnes-Dacey and Daniel Levy, eds., *The Regional Struggle for Syria*, report (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), 5, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR86_SYRIA_REPORT.pdf.

desired to maintain its strong ‘influence’ in the post-Saddam Iraq; and later these ambitions became a key strategy of the Iranian government. As part of its political and diplomatic manoeuvring, Iran has directly and indirectly supported the creation of a Shia dominated government in Iraq;²⁸ and penetrated deep into the fractured and crumbled Iraqi government so as to maintain a coalition that is pro-Tehran. This way, Iran has been able to counter any other influence in the region. Iraq’s reliance on Iran as an important ally, increased further with the emergence of Daesh or IS in Iraq:

In particular, Iraqi Shiites have grown to trust the powerful Iranian-backed militias that have taken charge since the Iraqi army deserted *en masse* last summer [2014].²⁹

After 9/11, Iran was placed on the ‘Axis of Evil’ – alongside North Korea and Iraq by the US. Previously, it was thought that with the establishment of Iran’s writ in Iraq, it would be able to grab hold of any opportunity that could provide it with a larger role in the region. Under Obama’s administration, there were chances of cooperation between the West (specifically the US) and Iran in areas such as fight against the IS. However, with recent developments under President Trump, the chances of any breakthrough have disappeared.

Considering the widescale operation against IS by the US, Iraqi and local forces and aspirations of Kurdish people to have an independent Kurdistan are two other critical factors. With the Syrian army in control of Deir ez-Zour, the last major stronghold of the IS in Syria, the battle is reported to be critical and tough, with IS losing ground from 50 kms to 50 miles in Iraq.³⁰ Iran, in this regard, had strong interests in fighting the threat of Daesh and has contributed significant support as well, in sending its military generals to Iraq. The dismantling of IS in Iraq is tantamount to

²⁸ Bazoobandi, “Iran’s Regional Policy: Interests, Challenges and Ambitions.”

²⁹ Ned Parker, Babak Dehghanpisheh and Isabel Coles, *How Iran Operates in Iraq*, report, eds. Simon Robinson and Richard Woods (London: Thomson Reuters, 2015), 2, <http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/15/02/MIDEAST-CRISIS:COMMITTEE.pdf>.

³⁰ “Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps,” *BBC News*, March 28, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034>.

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political victory for the administration in Iraq, however, creation of Kurdistan will hurt the national interests of Iran and Turkey:

Iraqi Kurds vote overwhelmingly for independence in a long-delayed referendum, but the Iraqi army (with Iranian support in backdrop) puts pressure on the regional government to annul the decision.³¹

Besides, the importance of Kirkuk (an oil-rich area), analysts argue that the idea of Iraqi Kurdistan can never be translated into complete statehood as the fight against the IS has concealed Kurd's political and economic weaknesses, at large.³² However, it is yet to be seen how the exploitation of Kurdish fighters in the contemporary context and denial of Kurdish rights for so long, turns out for both Iran and Iraq.

Yemen Crisis

Yemen is a key battlefield for the Iranian-Saudi regional conflict.³³

Political commentators view the crisis in Yemen as a failure of Saudi-backed political transition which was supposed to bring stability in a country threatened by an uprising which forced its President Ali Abdullah Saleh, a longtime authoritarian, to hand over the administration to his then-Deputy Hadi in November 2011.³⁴ The Houthi rebels and movement, majorly constituting of Yemen's Zaidi Shia minority have aligned with former President Saleh. The situation in Yemen escalated in March 2015, when Saudi-led coalition intervened on behalf of the internationally

³¹ "Iraqi Kurdistan Profile," *BBC News*, April 25, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28147263>.

³² Denise Natali, "Iraqi Kurdistan was Never Ready for Statehood," *Foreign Policy*, October 31, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/31/iraqi-kurdistan-was-never-ready-for-statehood/>.

³³ Maher Farrukh, *Yemen Crisis Situation Report* (Washington, D.C.: Critical Threats, 2017), <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/yemen-situation-report/2017-yemen-crisis-situation-report-november-22>.

³⁴ Yemen Crisis: Who is Fighting Whom?" *BBC News*, January 30, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29319423>.

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recognised government against the Houthi rebels.³⁵ Now the situation has turned into a humanitarian catastrophe:

Hunger and fighting could provoke mass famine and waves of refugees; the conflict could destabilize Saudi Arabia; and both sides appear locked in a cycle of escalating violence, derailing UN peace talks.³⁶

The tussle for power in Yemen has serious implications for the region and security of the West. As the crisis situation worsens, both the US and Saudi Arabia fear losing power over an important ally as Iran strengthens its control. Yemen has remained a key ally of the US against al-Qaeda. Strategically, Yemen shares border with Saudi Arabia and Oman, both of which are well known for their oil resources. In this lieu, Western countries have been resistant to the occurrence of any turmoil in the vicinity of major oil producing countries. Around 3 million barrels of oil pass through the Gulf of Aden, which further adds to the importance of Yemen and peace in the region.³⁷

In January 2015, Houthis took over Sanaa, the capital and surrounded the presidential palace and key areas, placing Hadi and his cabinet ministers, under house arrest. The President escaped to the Southern Port City of Aden, which was declared the new capital city.³⁸ Later, Hadi fled the country. Saudi Arabia specifically considers the group to be backed by Iran. In an effort to restore Hadi's government, Saudi Arabia along with eight other (mostly Sunni Arab states) began an air campaign and received logistical and intelligence support from the United Kingdom, the US and France. As of now, no side appears close to a decisive military victory.

³⁵ ICG, "Yemen" (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Mark Moussalli, "Not just a Proxy War: Yemen's Strategic Importance," *Global Risk Insights*, April 23, 2015, <https://globalriskinsights.com/2015/04/not-just-a-proxy-war-yemens-strategic-importance/>.

³⁸ "Yemen President Considers 'Aden Country's Capital'," *Al Jazeera*, March 7, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/yemen-president-considers-aden-country-capital-150307161253345.html>.

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Saudi Arabia perceives the situation in Yemen as an existential threat, as it shares border with it. It has been reported that opposition groups in Yemen have been attacking Saudi Arabia with missiles to which the latter, along with Coalition forces, has been responding in kind. These missile attacks have accelerated since 2015.³⁹ It is believed:

Belligerents in Yemen's civil war are no longer prioritizing the pursuit of a political resolution to the conflict. Six years after the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative to ensure a peaceful political transfer of a stable central government on November 23, 2011, Yemen has fractured and is now considered as the world's worst humanitarian crisis spot.⁴⁰

Amidst such a worsening situation, recently the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) met on June 11, 2018 due to concerns over an impending Coalition attack on Hodeidah, a city in Yemen. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths briefed the Council about efforts to negotiate a deal to forestall an offensive, while Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock briefed about the potential humanitarian consequences. Members have issued statements which 'reiterated that only a negotiated political settlement can bring the war to an end in Yemen.'⁴¹

Pakistan-Iran Bilateral Relations and Disturbing Factors

Since its Islamic Revolution, Iran has faced many regional and extra-regional threats and struggled to generate a comprehensive strategy to revive its historic civilisational prestige in the region.⁴²

After the Revolution, Iran adopted a defensive posture to absorb regional, international and domestic pressures, but kept its eye on the region's shifting geopolitical trends. As part of a long-term strategy, Iran

³⁹ Amanda Macias, "Iranian-Backed Militants in Yemen have Steadily Increased their Missile Attacks," *Business Insider*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.businessinsider.com/yemen-missile-war-graphic-2016-10>.

⁴⁰ Farrukh, *Yemen Crisis Situation Report*.

⁴¹ SCR, "Chronology of Events: Yemen" (New York: Security Council Report, 2018), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/yemen.php>.

⁴² Hussain and Ahmed, "Rising Iran: Implications for the Middle East and Pakistan," 29.

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followed the policy of strengthening itself internally in order to project itself as a regional power. However, post-Revolution Iran was unable to establish cordial relations with the Arab world primarily because it placed sovereignty and revolution export high on its priority list. And from here on, Pakistan's bilateral relations with Iran also started deteriorating. The interplay of regional geography and politics has always impacted the security-centric strategies and perceptions of both Iran and Pakistan:

If Iran's main security interests lie in West Asia and particularly the Persian Gulf region, Pakistan's principal security concerns revolve around India and Afghanistan. Any (economic or security related) development either in the Persian Gulf or South Asia could affect both countries due to the regional contiguity.⁴³

Pakistan and Iran being integral part of Asian sub-regions share common interests and concerns. Being from different sub-regions, Pakistan desires cordial economic and diplomatic ties with Iran and the Arab world simultaneously. However, due to economic sanctions and Iran's awkward relations with the West and Arab world respectively, not much has materialised, in this regard. Though in recent times, there has been constant articulation and exchange of cooperative sentiments, but there has been little movement economically and diplomatically. This section evaluates the factors that have been affecting the bilateral relations between Pakistan-Iran vis-à-vis the geopolitics of the Middle East. These factors include:

KSA-Pak-Iran Equation

The challenge which Pakistan faces at the moment is to maintain a balance between a next door neighbour and a traditional ally. It is believed that Saudi Arabia and the US have overshadowed the scope of cooperation with Iran as we see in the case of Iran-Pakistan (IP) Gas Pipeline project.⁴⁴

⁴³ Shah Alam, "Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions," *Strategic Analysis* 48, no. 4 (2004): 526-545 (528), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160408450157>.

⁴⁴ "IP Gas Pipeline: US Sanctions still a Hurdle," *Nation*, May 1, 2016, <https://nation.com.pk/01-May-2016/ip-gas-pipeline-us-sanctions-still-a-hurdle>.

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More so, the sectarian factor that emanates from the Saudi-Iranian equation also prohibits Pakistan from adopting independent policies towards both states. It is difficult for Pakistan to play favorites with either Saudi Arabia or Iran – considering Pakistan’s strategic relationship with the former and geographical proximity with the latter.

Creation of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT)⁴⁵ in December 2015 and joint declaration of Saudi Arabia and Israel at the Munich Security Conference in February 2017 (where both noted Iran as a threat to the stability of the Middle East, calling for global action against it),⁴⁶ are extremely important in determining the future foundations of Pakistan-Iran relations. The IMAFT is crucial for two reasons:

1. No major Shiite states of the region (Iran, Iraq and Syria) are part of it,⁴⁷ and,
2. It is headed by Pakistan’s former Chief of the Army Staff, General (R) Raheel Sharif.⁴⁸

The 41-member states have not been able to formulate specific terms and conditions of this alliance yet, however, it is repeatedly stated that it will be targeting the rebellions and opposition forces which are threatening the region’s stability. It is widely argued that:

The efforts of this alliance or any other organization anywhere, are unlikely to be fruitful unless these also address the need for justice and governance. Both these are issues of state and, if the disillusionment has been sufficiently

⁴⁵ Now called the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC).

⁴⁶ John Irish and Andrea Shalal, “There’s an Alliance Growing between Saudi Arabia and Israel — and Iran should be Worried,” *Business Insider*, February 19, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-and-israel-anti-iran-alliance-2017-2>.

⁴⁷ Imdad Hussain, “Pakistan Left with Limited Options in Saudi-Led Islamic Military Alliance,” *Express Tribune*, May 26, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1419936/pakistan-left-limited-options-saudi-led-islamic-military-alliance/>.

⁴⁸ Ahmed Rashid, “Should Pakistan Ex-Army Chief Lead Islamic Military Alliance?” *BBC News*, April 9, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39525449>.

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prolonged for people to espouse terrorism, affected states have, obviously, let the people's injuries fester for too long.⁴⁹

On November 26, 2017, the inaugural meeting of the IMCTC Ministers of Defence Council was held under the theme of 'Allied Against Terrorism', which declared that the platform will assist member countries in counterterrorism operations through capacity building and intelligence sharing.⁵⁰ This situation leaves Pakistan in a tough spot – to choose between submission to the KSA or convincing major stakeholders to clarify details further. Pakistan's decision to send military troops to Yemen can be considered a case in point as it was received critically by KSA and UAE.

Sectarian Divisions

Pakistan has been asked for assistance following episodes of turmoil in the Middle East, however, Islamabad has adopted a neutral approach, asking the concerned parties to show restraint without using force and violence, e.g. in Yemen. Pakistan's involvement in the Middle East situation could induce sectarian strife in the country:

The Shia population in Pakistan is estimated as being about 20 per cent of the country's total population. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal, 4734 persons were killed in sectarian violence in Pakistan, between 1989 and 2014 (the numbers does contradict with both the intensity and average killings per attack). The influence of two Middle Eastern powers – Saudi Arabia and Iran – is largely believed to have played a major role in the rise of sectarian violence in Pakistan since the 1980s.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Shaukat Qadir, "How will the Islamic Military Alliance Work?" *National*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/how-will-the-islamic-military-alliance-work-1.69151>.

⁵⁰ "Saudi-Led Coalition to Assist Member Countries in Counter-Terrorism Operations: Gen Raheel," *Dawn*, November 26, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1372999>.

⁵¹ Kashif Mumtaz, "The Middle East in Flux: How Should Pakistan Respond?" *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2016): 136-156, <http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Kashif-35-No.2.pdf>.

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Over the past five years, the sectarian-political narrative and emboldened militant networks in Pakistan have strengthened with rising conflict in the Middle East.⁵² Moreover, if the IS gets squeezed out of Iraq and Syria following operations conducted by the Allied and local forces (including security/defence forces, law enforcement agencies and Shia and tribal militia forces), it is possible that Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan may face spillover impacts as the outfit would be looking for space and human resources elsewhere.

Limited Economic Cooperation

The prospects of economic cooperation are bright but there is minimal bilateral trade and no banking or direct air linkages between Tehran and Islamabad. The IP pipeline project is one example. According to recent reports:

After shelving the USD 2 billion Qatar Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) deal, the Petroleum Ministry has announced that the LNG project would be displayed in the same shelf as the Iran-Pakistan pipeline...the project is of the same pedigree and should hence be showcased accordingly.⁵³

The US had been pushing Pakistan to shelve the IP gas pipeline project and asking it to sign an LNG deal... Pakistan had given a firm commitment to Tehran that it had started a LNG Gwadar pipeline contract, an alternative plan of implementing IP gas pipeline project and informed it that this pipeline would be connected with the Iran border once sanctions have been lifted... Pakistan was bound to get gas from Iran from January 2015 and could face USD 3 million per day penalty for failing to receive gas under sales purchase agreement (GSPA). But Tehran had not pressed Pakistan and did not sue it in international court after Pakistan had held out

⁵² The author was unable to find any recent reports about sectarian violence available in Pakistan to determine current trends.

⁵³ Aamir Abbasi, "Qatar LNG Deal to be Displayed on same Shelf as Iran-Pakistan Pipeline," *Pakistan Today*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/06/16/business-qatar-lng-deal-to-be-displayed-on-same-shelf-as-iran-pakistan-pipeline/>.

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assurance that it was going to start work on the LNG Gwadar pipeline project and that the remaining portion of 80 kilometers would be connected with the Iranian border once sanctions are lifted against Tehran.⁵⁴

As Iran and Pakistan share the coastal line along the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, respectively, the prospects of engaging these countries in projects of regional connectivity do exist. With the initiation of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), Pakistan and China have encouraged regional countries like Iran and Afghanistan, to participate. Initially, President Xi Jinping also visited Iran to advance economic and investment ties with one of China's major oil sources,⁵⁵ however, no official steps have been taken. Iran's Chabahar Port is important in this regard. Pakistani officials have been calling to give both Gwadar and Chabahar, sister port status, but again little has been done in this regard. Pakistan needs to analyse that Iran being at a central location between two sub-regions i.e., West and South Asia has strategic interests to protect both its sides.

In March 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister Javed Zarif in his visit to Pakistan agreed to enhance the bilateral trade upto USD 5 billion till 2021. Pakistan vowed to remove all obstacles hindering progress of the IP pipeline. Both sides also expressed their desire for the sustenance of peace in Afghanistan in order to yield maximum benefit from the initiatives of regional economic integration.⁵⁶ Similar aspirations were reiterated when the Foreign Minister met Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan in the same year.⁵⁷ Furthermore, officials agreed to work towards more Bilateral

⁵⁴ Zafar Bhutta, "Pakistan Shelves \$2b LNG Project," *Express Tribune*, June 14, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1434909/pakistan-shelves-2b-lng-project-citing-high-costs/>.

⁵⁵ Shannon Tiezzi, "Why China's President is Heading to Iran," *Diplomat*, January 19, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/01/why-chinas-president-is-heading-to-iran/>.

⁵⁶ "PM Abbasi, Iran's FM Zarif Agree on Increasing Bilateral Trade to \$5 Billion by 2021," *Dawn*, March 12, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2QWmtJ9>.

⁵⁷ "Pakistan, Iran Connected by Inseparable Bonds: Imran Khan," *News International*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/362132-pakistan-iran-connected-by-inseparable-bonds-imran-khan>.

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Political Consultations and the Joint Economic Commission.⁵⁸ One is yet to see how these renewed aspirations turn out given the fact that Pakistan has sent troops to Saudi Arabia and Iran has leased the Chabahar Port to India.

Moreover, with the persistence of conflict in the Middle East, Pakistan can also face consequences such as flow of remittances from oil-rich Gulf States and future of overseas Pakistanis working there if it offers unilateral support to Iran.

Indo-Iran-Afghan Nexus: Associated Security Concerns for Pakistan

In the presence of instability in Afghanistan and Indian aggressiveness, Pakistan has hostile neighbours on its western and eastern sides which threaten its national security. Islamabad certainly does not want a similar inimical presence on its south western border with Iran. Unlike the past, there is a convergence of interest between Iran and Pakistan, over the situation in Afghanistan, especially after the emergence of Daesh. Iran faces dual threat from conflict situations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Pakistan has similar concerns regarding the influence of Daesh due to its long porous border with Afghanistan.

Another important security dynamic also requires that Pakistan maintain cordial ties with Iran – India’s growing strategic interests in Afghanistan and Iran. New Delhi has invested extensively in Iran’s Chabahar Port in order to access Afghanistan and Central Asian Republics (CARs):

When India, Iran, and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement to develop a transport corridor from Chabahar through Afghanistan, it marked the culmination of over a decade of Indian hopes for an alternate land route to Central Asia. The deal depends on Indian state investment: state-owned India Ports Global Private Limited (IPGPL) is responsible for expanding the port itself to bring capacity to 12 million tons per year; India’s EXIM Bank has offered a

⁵⁸ “Zarif Meets Pakistan PM Imran Khan in Islamabad,” *Tehran Times*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/427007/Zarif-meets-Pakistan-PM-Imran-Khan-in-Islamabad>.

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USD 500 million line of credit to fund work on rail connections to the port; and Ircon International, another public-sector undertaking, will build a USD 1.6 billion railroad from Chabahar north to Zahedan on the Iran/Afghanistan border. Zahedan in turn is a node on the Iranian rail network, which connects to Turkmenistan and eventually to Kazakhstan's Caspian seacoast. It also provides convenient access to the start of the Indian-built Zarjan-Dilaram highway, which intersects with the Afghanistan ring road. Despite the occasional hiccup, work on developing Chabahar appears to be progressing.⁵⁹

Since Iran has always reiterated that it will not allow its soil to be used against Pakistan, the leasing of Chabahar Port to India does concern Pakistan vis-à-vis its security and the Gwadar Port. However, these concerns can be neutralised by Iran with an argument that Pakistan-Iran bilateral relations must not be affected by the 'Indian factor'.

Pakistan also wants to maintain good relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries to avoid their likely tilt towards India, as it happened in the case of UAE when Pakistan declined to send its forces to Yemen. Iran's diplomatic support is also important to Pakistan on issues such as the Kashmir dispute – 'Everyone should openly support people of Yemen, Bahrain and Kashmir: Ayatollah Khamenei', was posted as the headline of a news item on June 2016, on one of Khamenei's official websites.⁶⁰

Conclusion

The situation in the Middle East is chaotic and can be considered a battlefield for influence and power. The volatile nature of the situation has engulfed the entire region and pushed it towards instability and unpredictability. What was primarily only friction between the

⁵⁹ Sarah Watson, "Does India's Chabahar Deal Make Sense?" *Diplomat*, May 24, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/does-indias-chabahar-deal-make-sense/>.

⁶⁰ "For the First Time in Seven Years, Ayatollah Khamenei Rakes Up Kashmir," *Wire*, June 27, 2017, <https://thewire.in/151705/iran-khamenei-kashmir/>.

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governments and people of the Arab countries, has now turned into an arena of continuous war and lawlessness.

Saudi Arabia which believes that an arc is being built around it by Shiite majority states (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Yemen), sees this as an existential threat. Meanwhile Iran, which was happy or at least satisfied with its power play in neighbouring countries, specifically after signing the JCPOA, has lost US support after President Trump's election, and Washington's backing out of the hard-struck nuclear deal.

Considering Pakistan's historic involvement and cooperative ties with the Arab world, and proximal geography with Iran, the situation is unique given the norms, options and previous foreign policy practices. The biggest challenge lies in the maintenance of balanced relations with the countries in the Arab world and Iran, simultaneously. Pakistan needs to tread carefully by adopting an independent policy with respect to relations with a traditional ally and immediate neighbour next door. Such formulation of 'independent policy concerning both countries' requires innovation and brilliance. Islamabad must deal with Saudi Arabia irrespective of its relations with Iran and vice versa. Also, the government needs to revisit its policy of mediation between the two countries.

Where Iran needs to come out of its identity and influence complex; Saudi Arabia, being custodian of Muslim holy places, should assume the role of a rational player and give due regard to the concerns of regional stability and the likely pitfalls of its lack thereof. Reconciliation or acceptance of respective roles of power-sharing could be a major solution. But for this to materialise, both countries need to join hands and contribute towards peace and coexistence in the region. ■